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# International Educator

Center for International Education

Spring 2010

## TWO STUDY PROGRAMS ABROAD PROVIDE ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE STUDENT WITH A WIDE RANGE OF EXPERIENCES

by Sheila Jarnes

*Sheila Jarnes is a senior from Newburyport, MA, majoring in Environmental Conservation.*



*Jarnes while on a class trip to Granada. Of her semester in Central America, she says, "We lived and breathed scientific research."*

Somehow, I have been fortunate enough to study abroad twice. I always knew that I wanted to travel, but didn't think that study abroad was in the cards for me – that was something that other people did. Then one day I decided to just go for it – I mean, why couldn't I travel, too?

So I began researching my options. Because I knew that I didn't want the typical European study abroad experience, I chose Australia my sophomore year and Costa Rica my senior year. Aside from the climate, the two programs could not have been more different. It's hard to describe either semester briefly, and to give them a quick snapshot does not do them justice.

Sophomore year I studied at James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland, a university equivalent in size to UNH. There, I lived in one of the dorms with both Australian and foreign students, took classes, and traveled

during breaks and weekends. For one of my classes, Coral Reef Geomorphology, we spent the weekend at a research station on the Great Barrier Reef studying coral formations. It was wonderful to have access to such rich resources while still having the ability to travel freely throughout the country.

In Costa Rica, I spent the fall semester of my senior year at the School for Field Studies. I lived with 26 other students from the United States, most of whom had some kind of background in environmental science and varied backgrounds in Spanish. Some were just starting to learn the language, while others had already taken a few classes. The program was highly structured, which took a lot of getting used to, but provided a learning experience like no other. The first two months consisted of classes during the day and sometimes activities at night, such as soccer with the community or salsa lessons. We had weekly trips to places such as rainforests, organic coffee farms, bio-fuel plantations, and volcanoes. After about a month, we each had a home stay with a local family for a weekend. It improved my Spanish so much and helped me achieve my goal of holding a conversation in Spanish. Although the home stay was short, I developed a strong relationship with my family and visited them in town whenever I could.

At the end of October as a break before finals, all of the students and faculty went to Nicaragua for nine days. For the first few days we stayed on Ometepe Island, a beautiful, serene area on Lake Nicaragua surrounded by unbelievable volcanoes. The second half of the trip was spent in Granada, a colonial city. The days spent in Granada were extremely eye-opening, as children and adults desperately begged us for money. This was especially heartbreaking after we volunteered at a children's center, and the same children we helped earlier that evening later asked us for money or food. Briefly mentioning that evening cannot truly describe what the sights, smells and sounds of those streets were like, but I will never forget those children and am forever changed from what I saw there.

The final month was spent on directed research projects with the professors. We were divided into three groups, nine students per professor, to continue working on the five-year research program, which currently focuses on the sustainability of the country's tourism. I was in a group studying the organic and conventional coffee farms in the area. For a week, we collected detailed data at local coffee farms concerning biodiversity, carbon fixation, soil conservation, and watershed protection. We each had specific topics and prepared papers and oral presentations which were used to benefit the clients. This project taught me more about scientific research in one month than I have learned in all my classes so far. We lived and breathed scientific research that month until I truly understood its meaning.

Both semesters have been the most amazing experiences for very different reasons. They have opened my eyes to new experiences and granted me opportunities that I never thought possible for myself, and I am so thankful to have had them.

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